

Intrinsic Value In Archival Material

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Introduction

The term "intrinsic value" has long been used by archivists to describe historical materials that should be retained in their original form rather than as copies. In 1979 the term gained particular importance for the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) as it began to consider possible large-scale replacement of paper records with miniaturized or other copies. To meet the challenge of distinguishing between records that need not be retained in their original form after an acceptable copy has been created and those that require preservation in the original, NARS established the Committee on Intrinsic Value. The Committee's work was three-fold: first, to write a comprehensive and broadly applicable definition of intrinsic value; second, to define the qualities and characteristics of records having intrinsic value; and third, to demonstrate application of the concept of intrinsic value in decision making. The Committee completed a preliminary report in January 1980 and its final report in September of that year.

The Committee intended that its work should be useful for decisions relating to all physical types of records and manuscripts and should be relevant under varying and unforeseen circumstances. The Committee therefore sought first to establish the theoretical basis for the concept and then to be as specific as possible in identifying the qualities and characteristics of historical materials having intrinsic value. The Committee recognized that application of the concept of intrinsic value would be subjective and must always be dependent on trained archival judgment and professional debate.

Report of the Committee on Intrinsic Value

Intrinsic Value in Archival Materials

Intrinsic value is the archival term that is applied to permanently valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical form the only archivally acceptable form for preservation. Although all records in their original physical form have qualities and characteristics that would not be preserved in copies, records with intrinsic value have them to such a significant degree that the originals must be saved.

The qualities or characteristics that determine intrinsic value may be physical or intellectual; that is, they may relate to the physical base of the record and the means by which information is recorded on it or they may relate to the information contained in the record. Records with intrinsic value may be retained for either their evidential or informational value.

The archivist is responsible for determining which records have intrinsic value. Ordinarily this determination is made at the series level. As in all other archival appraisal activities, context is the key to making these determinations and context is normally best preserved by considering the entire series. The archivist, however, also may determine that certain individual record items within a series have intrinsic value, especially those items to be retained because of special physical characteristics.

Qualities and Characteristics of Records With Intrinsic Value

All record materials having intrinsic value possess one or more of the following specific qualities or characteristics. These qualities or characteristics relate to the physical nature of the records, their prospective uses, and the information they contain.

1. *Physical form that may be the subject for study if the records provide meaningful documentation or significant examples of the form*

Documents may be preserved in their original form as evidence of technological development. For example, a series of early press copies, glass-plate negatives, or wax-cylinder sound recordings may be retained. All records having a particular physical form would not be considered to have intrinsic value because of this characteristic; however, a selection broad enough to provide evidence of technological development would be considered to have some value.

2. *Aesthetic or artistic quality*

Records having aesthetic or artistic quality may include photographs; pencil, ink, or watercolor sketches; maps; architectural drawings; frakturs; and engraved and/or printed forms, such as bounty-land warrants.

3. *Unique or curious physical features*

Physical features that are unique or curious might include quality and texture of paper, color, wax seals, imprints and watermarks, inks, and unusual bindings. All records having a particular physical feature would not be considered to have intrinsic value because of this feature; however, an exemplary selection of each type would be considered to have such value.

4. *Age that provides a quality of uniqueness*

Age is a relative rather than an absolute quality. Generally, records of earlier date are of more significance than records of later date. This can be because of a historical change in the functions and activities of the creator of the records, the scarcity of earlier records, a change in recordkeeping practices, or a combination of these. Age can be a factor even with comparatively recent records. The earliest records concerning, for example, the development of the radio industry or of nuclear power could have intrinsic value because of age.

5. *Value for use in exhibits*

Records used frequently for exhibits normally have several qualities and characteristics that give them intrinsic value. Records with exhibit value impressively convey the immediacy of an event, depict a significant issue, or impart a sense of the person who is the subject or originator of the record. In these cases, the impact of the original document cannot be equaled by a copy.

6. *Questionable authenticity, date, author, or other characteristic that is significant and ascertainable by physical examination*

Some records are of doubtful authenticity or have informational content that is open to question. Although it is impossible to foresee which documents will be questioned in the future, certain types of documents are well known to have the potential for controversy and, if the original records are extant, handwriting and signatures can be examined, paper age can be ascertained, and other physical tests can be performed. In some cases the controversy can be resolved by recourse to the original item (such as by an examination of the handwriting, the age of the paper, or the original negative of the photostatic print), while in other cases the item will not be conclusive but will provide the researcher with the best evidence from which to draw conclusions (original photographs of UFO's, for example).

7. *General and substantial public interest because of direct association with famous or historically significant people, places, things, issues, or events*

This criterion is not only the most difficult to apply, but also the most important in terms of the volume of records to which it could be applied. It could be used to justify preserving in original form almost all permanently valuable records because of their historical importance. On the other hand, if limited to records of unusual significance, it would be used to justify disposal of almost all original records. Archival judgment is the crucial factor in determining whether there is general and substantial public interest, whether the association is direct, and whether the subject is famous or historically significant. Generally, those series with a high concentration of such

information should be preserved.

8. *Significance as documentation of the establishment or continuing legal basis of an agency or institution*

Agencies or institutions are founded and acquire or lose functions and responsibilities through the actions of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the Government. Records documenting these actions may be found concentrated in series or scattered in various series. They have in common the characteristic of documenting the shifts in function of the agency or institution at the highest level.

9. *Significance as documentation of the formulation of policy at the highest executive levels when the policy has significance and broad effect throughout or beyond the agency or institution*

Numerous records reflect policy decisions; however, most policy decisions have a relatively limited impact and reflect a relatively small area of authority. The characteristics that give policy records intrinsic value are the origin of the records at the highest executive levels, breadth of effect, and importance of subject matter.

Application of the Concept of Intrinsic Value

Records that possess any characteristic or quality of intrinsic value should be retained in their original form if possible. The concept of intrinsic value, therefore, is not relative. However, application of the concept of intrinsic value is relative; opinions concerning whether records have intrinsic value may vary from archivist to archivist and from one generation of archivists to another. Professional archival judgment, therefore, must be exercised in all decisions concerning intrinsic value. Coordination between units holding records within an archival institution also may be necessary. For example, members of units holding similar records whose form may be the subject for study (quality 1) should consult one another to ensure that an adequate but not duplicative selection of records in that form is preserved. Although the concept of intrinsic value may be easier to apply to older records, decisions concerning intrinsic value can be made for all records determined to have sufficient value to warrant archival retention.

Copies of records having intrinsic value may be made for necessary archival purposes, including use by researchers. In fact, the fragility, rarity, or significance of the records may require that researchers normally work from reproductions.

Records that have intrinsic value should be considered for conservation or restoration; however, the determination that records have intrinsic value is only the first step in a decision making continuum for preservation activities. Priorities and order of preservation activities should be guided by additional factors such as significance and frequency of use, rate of deterioration, seriousness of potential future preservation problems, and efficacy and expense of available treatments.

Although records with intrinsic value constitute the core of the holdings that archival institutions should maintain in original form, institutions also must retain records for which archivally acceptable copies cannot be made. This report does not attempt to establish comprehensive standards for archivally acceptable copies. At a minimum, however, such copies should have durability and utility for research use and for duplication equivalent to the records in their original form. If adequate copies of such records cannot be made, originals lacking intrinsic value may not be considered for disposition. For example, because, at present, reproductions made from duplicates of audiovisual records normally are of lower quality than reproductions made from the originals, most audiovisual records should be retained in their original form. When copies with equivalent or superior quality can be produced from reproductions, the originals could be considered for disposal.

Some records without intrinsic value also must be preserved in original physical form because such preservation is required by law.

Following are three examples of the use of the concept of intrinsic value in the decisionmaking process as applied to particular series of records in the National Archives. In these examples, archivists first reviewed the series in accordance with the intrinsic value criteria. Second, if the records lacked intrinsic value, archivists then determined whether any statute required retention of the records in their original form. Finally, if the responses to the first two inquiries were negative, archivists examined the archival adequacy of the copies of the records. While archivists may not prepare formal papers such as those that follow, similar questions should be asked and answered for any proposed disposition of original records.

I. RG 33, Records of the Federal Extension Service. Farm Labor Program. Prisoner-of-War Program. 1943-46. 1ft.

Arranged alphabetically by State.

Correspondence regarding the needs, placements, and status of prisoners of war employed in agriculture. The records reflect the relationship between the use of prisoner-of-war labor and migratory labor from Mexico and the Caribbean.

. Intrinsic value criteria

1. *Example of physical form?*

No. These are records in the usual physical forms of mid-20th-century records.

2. *Aesthetic or artistic?*

No. These records are not visually interesting.

3. *Unique or curious physical features?*

No. There are no three dimensional materials or unusual bindings, seals, papers, or inks.

4. *Age?*

No. These records are not unique in terms of age because there are many records from the World War II period, including records relating to POW's, among the permanent holdings.

5. *Exhibit potential?*

Unlikely.

6. *Authenticity?*

No. There are no doubts as to the authenticity of the records and no suggestion of forgery or other record tampering. There is no problem of signature or handwriting identification.

7. *General public interest?*

No. Although the records reflect a significant issue in U.S. history (i.e., the treatment of POW's in World War II), the records are not used frequently, no significant persons are named in the records, and no significant events are recorded.

8. *Legal basis of an agency or institution?*

No. These are records of implementation.

9. *Policy at high level of Government?*

No. These are operating level records.

Conclusion: This series of records does not have intrinsic value.

B. Are these records covered by a statute requiring retention in original physical form?

No.

C. Can adequate copies be created?

Yes. The records do not vary in size, there are no problems of scale or color coding, and the ease of reference is not impaired by use of a reproduction. There is no privacy problem that would bar reproduction at this time.

Conclusion: The custodial unit can duplicate and request disposition of these records.

II. RG 49, Records of the Bureau of Land Management. Public Land Disposals. Abandoned Military Reservations. 1818-1945.60 ft.

Arranged chronologically by date of initial disposition or activity on the reservation land.

Executive orders, correspondence, title papers, plats, maps, blueprints, tracings, and printed items that document the General Land Office's role in the creation of military reservations from public lands and its responsibility for the disposal of reservations or portions of reservations abandoned by the War and Navy Departments. The records include information about goods and services available on the posts. Related records are found in other series of records of the General Land Office and among the general records of the Department of the Interior, the Office of the Chief of Engineers, the Office of the Quartermaster General, the Adjutant General's Office, United States Army commands, and the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army).

. Intrinsic value criteria

1. *Example of physical form?*

No. These are routine types of records of the Government in the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. *Aesthetic or artistic?*

Occasionally. The cartographic and architectural items are usually utilitarian, although some have artistic embellishments.

3. *Unique or curious physical features?*

No. There are no three-dimensional materials or unusual bindings, seals, papers, or inks.

4. *Age?*

Yes. The pre-Civil War records concerning military reservations in the United States are small in quantity in comparison to the records of post-Civil War periods. In these files, pre- and post-Civil War materials are interfiled.

5. *Exhibit potential?*

Yes. These records could be used for exhibits on military posts, exploration of the West, organization of the frontier, surveying, land disposition, military organization, and even autographs (William Tecumseh Sherman, Joel Poinsett).

6. *Authenticity?*

No problem.

7. *General public interest?*

Yes. Many military historians and enthusiasts use these materials; the Council on Abandoned Military Posts is particularly interested.

8. *Legal basis of an agency or institution?*

No. These are records of the implementation of land acquisition and disposition policy, not the records of the establishment of the basis for the policy.

9. *Policy at high level of Government?*

No. Although the records do contain significant correspondence from the Secretaries of War and the Interior regarding the implementation of land disposition policy, this correspondence does not document the making of policy.

Conclusion: The records have intrinsic value.

III. RG 341, Records of Headquarters U.S. Air Force. Air Technical Intelligence Center, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. Aerial Phenomena Branch. Three related series of audiovisual records composed of photographs (7,280), sound recordings (23), and motion pictures (20) from "Project Blue Book." 1950-67. 7,323 items.

Arranged by case number.

Audiovisual records in different formats created, acquired, or collected by the U.S. Air Force during its official investigation into the existence of unidentified flying objects (UFO's). There are photographs (35 mm negatives) of

21 alleged sightings of UFO's, including some photos recorded on roll film that show timed radar responses of the observed phenomena. The motion pictures (8 mm and 16 mm) are composed mainly of original camera footage (unedited) filmed by military personnel and civilians. The sound recordings were recorded or acquired by the Air Force and contain interviews with individuals claiming to have seen UFO's as well as sound recordings made at the time of the alleged sightings. Related textual records are in accompanying series of case files and project files of "Project Blue Book."

. Intrinsic Value Criteria

1. *Example of physical form?*

No. The forms represented are standard, common forms of audiovisual reproductions.

2. *Aesthetic or artistic value?*

No.

3. *Unique or curious physical features?*

No.

4. *Age?*

No.

5. *Exhibit potential?*

Yes.

6. *Authenticity?*

Yes. The entire phenomenon of the history of UFO's and the controversy surrounding their existence, as well as questions concerning the purpose and function of "Project Blue Book," require that the original records created or acquired by the Air Force and deposited with NARS be preserved and available for research scrutiny, testing and examination, and verification. This is especially a consideration because audiovisual documents are highly susceptible to tampering and manipulation. There is continued speculation and public doubt about the adequacy of the "evidence" and the conduct and conclusions of the official investigation.

7. *General public interest?*

Yes. The history of UFO's, although a specialized research topic, does have a wide-ranging and emotional interest and fascination to the public.

8. *Legal basis of agency or institution?*

No.

9. *Policy at high level of Government?*

No. These are operating level records.

Conclusion: The records have intrinsic value.

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